

Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

(Continued from First Page.)

ho was slowly dragging both across the slippery floor to where the knife lay. Nearer and nearer his outstretched fingers came to the knife. In vain I yelled and struggled. My voice was lost in the awful din, and the battle raged on a barrel head. Above me, standing like a demon, was Baptiste, yelling like a demon. In vain I called to him. My fingers could just reach his foot, and he heeded not at all my touch. Slowly Idaho was dragging his almost unconscious victim toward the knife. His fingers were touching the blade point when, under a sudden inspiration, I pulled out my penknife, opened it with my teeth and drove the blade into Baptiste's foot. With a bloodcurdling yell he sprang down and began dancing round in his rage, peering among the barrels.

"Look! Look!" I was calling in glee, and pointing. "For heaven's sake, look, Baptiste!"

The fingers had closed upon the knife, the knife was already high in the air, when, with a shriek, Baptiste cleared the room at a bound, and under the knife could fall the little Frenchman's foot had caught the uplifted wrist and sent the knife flying to the wall.

Then there was a great rushing sound as of wind through the forest, and the lights went out. When I awoke, I found myself lying with my head on Graeme's knees and Baptiste sprinkling snow on my face. As I looked up I saw a hand raised, and smiling down into my eyes, he said:

"Good boy! It was a great fight, and we put it up well. And then he whispered, 'I owe you my life, my boy.'"

His words thrilled my heart through and through, for I loved him as only men can love men, but I only answered:

"I could not keep them back."

"It was well done," he said, and I felt proud.

I confess I was thankful to be so well out of it, for Graeme got off with a bone in his wrist broken and I with a couple of ribs cracked, but had it not been for the open barrel of whisky which kept them occupied for a time, offering too good a chance to be lost, and for the timely arrival of Nelson, neither of us had ever seen the light again.

We found Craig sound asleep upon his couch. His consternation on waking to see us torn, bruised and bloody was laughable, but he hastened to find us warm water and bandages, and we soon felt comfortable.

Baptiste was radiant with pride and delight over the fight and hovered about Graeme and me, giving vent to his feelings in admiring French and English expletives. But also was disgusted because of the failure at Slaviv's, for when Nelson looked in he saw Slaviv's French Canadian wife in charge, with her baby on her lap, and he came back to Slaviv and said, "Come away; we can't touch this," and Slaviv, after looking in, agreed that nothing could be done. A baby held the fort.

As Craig listened to the account of the fight he tried hard not to approve, but he could not keep the gleam out of his eyes, and as I pictured Graeme dashing back the crowd through the barricade till he was brought down by the chair Craig laughed gently and put his hand on Graeme's knee, and as I went on to describe my agony while Idaho's fingers were gradually nearing the knife his face grew pale and his eyes grew wide with horror.

"Baptiste here did the business," I said, and the little Frenchman nodded complacently and said:

"Dat's ma sure."

"By the way, how is your foot?" asked Graeme.

"He's fuss rate. Dat's what you call one bite of—of dat lee bee. He's dere; you put your finger dere, he's not dere. What you call him?"

"Flea!" I suggested.

"Oh!" cried Baptiste. "Dat's one line of flea."

"I was thankful I was under the barrels," I replied, smiling.

"Oh! Dat's ma sure ma sure ma sure. I jump and swear ma awful bad. Dat's pardon me, M'sieu Craig, he?"

But Craig only smiled at him rather sadly.

"It was awfully risky," he said to Graeme, "and it was hardly worth it. They'll get more whisky, and anyway the league is gone."

"Well," said Graeme, with a sigh of satisfaction, "it is not quite such a one sided affair as it was."

And we could say nothing in reply, for we could hear Nixon snoring in the next room, and no one had heard of Billy, and there were others of the league that we knew were even now down at Slaviv's. It was thought best that all should remain in Mr. Craig's shack, not knowing what might happen, and so we lay where we could, and we needed none to sing us to sleep.

When I awoke, stiff and sore, it was to find breakfast ready and old man Nelson in charge. As we were seated Craig came in, and I saw that he was not the man of the night before. His courage had come back; his face was quiet and his eye clear. He was his own man again.

"Geordie has been out all night, but has failed to find Billy," he announced quietly.

We did not talk much. Graeme and I worried with our broken bones, and the others suffered from a general morning depression. But after breakfast as the men were beginning to move, Craig took down his Bible, and saying, "Wait a few minutes, men," he read slowly, in his beautiful, clear voice, that psalm for his fighters,

"God is our refuge and strength,"

and so on to the noble words:

"The Lord of Hosts is with us: The God of Jacob is our refuge. How the mighty words pulled us to-

gether, lifted us till we grew ashamed of our ignoble rage and of our ignoble depression!

And then Craig prayed in simple, straightforward words. There was acknowledgment of failure, but I knew he was thinking chiefly of himself; there was gratitude, and that was for the men about him, and I felt my face burn with shame; there was a petition for help, and we all thought of Nixon and Billy and the men waiting for their debauch at Slaviv's—this pure, bright morning. Then he asked that we might be made faithful and worthy of God, whose battle it was. Then we all stood up and shook hands with him in silence, and every man knew a covenant was being made. But none saw his meeting with Nixon. He sent us all away before that.

Nothing was heard of the destruction of the hotel stock in trade. Unpleasant questions would certainly be asked, and the proprietor decided to let bad alone. On the point of respectability the success of the bill was not considered, but the antileague men were content. If no militant.

Billy Breen was found by Geordie late in the afternoon in his own old and deserted shack, breathing heavily, covered up in his filthy, moldering bedclothes, with a half empty bottle of whisky at his side. Geordie's grief and rage were beyond even his Scotch control. He spoke few words, but these were of such concentrated vehemence that no one felt the need of Abe's assistance in vocabulary.

Poor Billy! We carried him to Mrs. Mavor's home, put him in a warm bath, washed him in blankets and gave him little sips of hot water, then of hot milk and coffee, as I had seen a clever doctor in the hospital treat a similar case of nerve and heart depression. But the already weakened system could not recover from the awful shock of the exposure following the debauch, and on Sunday afternoon we saw that his heart was falling fast. All day the miners had been dropping in to inquire after him, for Billy had been a great favorite in other days, and the attention of the town had been admiringly centered upon his fight of these last weeks. It was with no ordinary sorrow that the news of his condition was received. As Mrs. Mavor sang to him his large, coarse hands moved in time to the music, but he did not open his eyes till he heard Mr. Craig's voice in the next room. That he spoke his name, and Mr. Craig was kneeling beside him in a moment. The words came slowly:

"Oh tried to fight hit out—but—Oh got beaten. Hit 'urts to think 'e's ashahet of me. O'd like to done better—O'd would."

"Ashamed of you, Billy," said Craig in a voice that broke. "Not he."

"Ah!—ye ha!—elped me so!" he went on. "Oh will O'd a done better—O'd do." And his eyes sought Geordie and then turned to Mrs. Mavor, who smiled back at him with a world of love in her eyes. "You hadn't hatched of me—your eyes saigh so," he said, looking at her.

"No, Billy," she said, and I wondered at her steady voice, "not a bit. Why, Billy, I am proud of you."

He gazed up at her with wonder and ineffable love in his little eyes, then lifted his hand slightly toward her. She lifted quickly and took it in both of hers, stroking it and kissing it.

"Oh! happy O'd done better. O'd ha! ha! ha!" he went back on "Im. Hit was the lemonade. The boys didn't mean no 'arm, but hit started the 'ol himself."

Geordie hurried out some bitter words. "It's the lemonade," he said, and he turned toward Mrs. Mavor, and his eyes kept waiting till Geordie said hurriedly:

"Na, na, lad! I'll just leave them till the Almighty."

Then Mrs. Mavor sang softly, smoothing his hand, "Just as I am," and Billy dozed quietly for half an hour.

When he awoke again, his eyes were closed and anxious.

"Oh tried 'ard. Oh wanted to win," he struggled to say.

By this time Craig was master of himself, and he answered in a clear, distinct voice:

"Listen, Billy. You made a great fight, and you are going to win yet. And besides, do you remember the sheep that got lost over the mountains? This parable was Billy's special delight. "He didn't beat it when he got it, did he? He took it in his arms and carried it home, and so he will you."

And Billy, keeping his eyes fastened on Mr. Craig, simply said:

"Will 'e?"

"Sure," said Craig.

"Will 'e?" he repeated, turning his eyes upon Mrs. Mavor.

"Why, yes, Billy," she answered cheerfully, though the tears were streaming from her eyes. "I would, and he loves you far more."

He looked at her, smiled and closed his eyes. I put my hand on his heart. It was fluttering feebly. Again a troubled look passed over his face.

"My—poor—old—mother!" he whispered. "She's—bin—the wuks."

"I shall take care of her, Billy," said Mrs. Mavor in a clear voice, and again Billy smiled. Then he turned his eyes to Mr. Craig and from him to Geordie and at last to Mrs. Mavor, where they rested. She bent over and kissed him twice on the forehead.

"Tell 'er," he said, with unction, "e's took me 'ome."

"Yes, Billy," she cried, gazing into his glowing eyes.

He tried to lift her hand. She kissed him again. He drew one deep breath and lay quite still.

"Thank the blessed Saviour!" said Mr. Craig reverently. "He has taken him home."

But Mrs. Mavor held the dead hand tight and sobbed out passionately:

"Oh, Billy, Billy, you helped me once when I needed help! I cannot forget!"

And Geordie, growing, "Aye, laddie, laddie!" passed out into the fading light of the early evening.

Next day no one went to work, for to all it seemed a sacred day. They carried him into the little church, and there Mr. Craig spoke of his long, hard fight and of his final victory, for he died without a fear and with love to the men who, not knowing had been his death. And there was no bitterness in any heart, for Mr. Craig read the story of the sheep and told how gently he had taken Billy home, but, though no word was spoken, it was there the league was made again.

They laid him under the pines beside

Lewis Mavor, and the miners threw sprigs of evergreen into the open grave. When slavin, sobbing bitterly, brought his sprig, he no stopped him, though all thought it strange.

As we turned to leave the grave the light from the evening sun came softly through the gap in the mountains and, filling the valley, touched the trees and the little mound beneath with glory, and I thought of that other glory which is brighter than the sun and was not sorry that poor Billy's woe night was over, and I could not help agreeing with Craig that it was there the league had its revenge.

CHAPTER X.
WHAT CAME TO SLAVIV.

BILLY BREEN'S legacy to the Black Rock mining camp was a new league, which was more than the old league remade. The league was new in its spirit and in its methods. The impression made upon the camp by Billy Breen's death was very remarkable, and I have never been quite able to account for it. The mood of the community at the time was peculiarly susceptible. Billy was one of the oldest of the old timers. His decline and fall had been a long process, and his struggle for life and manhood was striking enough to arrest the attention and awaken the sympathy of the whole camp. We instinctively sided with a man in his struggle for freedom, for we feel that freedom is native to him and to us. The sudden collapse of the struggle stirred the men with a deep pity for the beaten man and a deep contempt for those who had tricked him to his doom; but, though the pity and the contempt remained, the gloom was relieved and the sense of defeat removed from the men's minds by the transference of Billy's last hour. Mr. Craig, reading of the tragedy of Billy's death, transfigured defeat into victory, and this was gradually accepted by the men as the true reading, though to them it was full of mystery. But they could not understand and appreciate at all the spirit that breathed through the words of the dying man: "Don't be 'ard on 'em. They didn't mean no 'arm." And this was the new spirit of the league.

It was this spirit that surprised Slaviv into sudden tears, at the grave's side. He had come braced for enmity and vengeance, for all knew it was he who had doctored Billy's lemonade, and instead of vengeance the message from the dead that echoed through the voice of the living was one of pity and forgiveness.

But the days of the league's negative, defensive warfare were over. The fight was to be to the death, and now the war was to be carried into the enemy's country. The league men proposed a thoroughly equipped and well conducted coffee room, reading room and hall to parallel the enemy's lines of operation and defeat them with their own weapons upon their own ground. The main outlines of the scheme were clearly defined and were easily seen, but the perfecting of the details called for all Craig's tact and good sense. When, for instance, Vernon Winton, who had charge of the entertainment department, came for Craig's opinion as to a minstrel troupe and private theatricals, Craig was prompt with his answer:

"Anything clean goes."

"A bigger show," asked Winton.

"Depends upon the niggers," replied Craig, with a gravelly comic look, slowly adding, "Ask Mrs. Mavor. And so the League Minstrel and Dramatic company became an established fact and proved, as Craig afterward told me, a great means of grace to the camp.

Slaviv had charge of the social department, whose special care it was to see that the men were made welcome to the cozy, cheerful reading room, where they might chat, smoke, read, write or play games, according to fancy.

But Craig felt that the success or failure of the scheme would largely depend upon the character of the resident manager, who, while caring for reading room and hall, would control and operate the important department represented by the coffee room.

"At this point the whole business may come to grief," he said to Mrs. Mavor, without whose counsel nothing was done.

"Why come to grief?" she asked brightly.

"Because if we don't get the right man that's what will happen," he replied in a tone that spoke of anxious worry.

"But we shall get the right man, never fear." Her serene courage never faltered. "He will come to us."

Craig turned and gazed at her in frank admiration and said:

"If I only had your courage!"

"Courage!" she answered quickly. "It is not for you to say that." And at his answering look the red came into her cheeks and the depths in her eyes glowed, and I marveled and wondered, looking at Craig's cool face, whether his blood were running evenly through his veins. But his voice was quiet—a shade too quiet, I thought—as he gravely replied:

"I would often be a coward but for the shame of it."

And so the league waited for the man to come who was to be resident manager and make the new enterprise a success. And come he did, but the manner of his coming was so extraordinary that I have believed in the doctrine of a special providence ever since, for, as Craig said, "If he had come straight from heaven, I could not have been more surprised."

While the league was thus waiting, its interest centered upon Slaviv, chiefly because he represented more than any other the forces of the enemy, and though Billy Breen stood between him and the vengeance of the angry men who would have made short work of him and his saloon, nothing could save him from himself, and after the funeral Slaviv went to his bar and drank whisky as he had never drunk before. But the more he drank the fiercer and gloomier he became, and when the men drinking with him chafed him he swore deeply and with such threats that they left him alone.

It did not help Slaviv either to have Nixon stride in through the crowd drinking at his bar and give him words of warning.

"It is not your fault, Slaviv," he said in a slow, even voice, "that you and your precious crew didn't send me to my death too. You've won four let, but I want to say that next time,

though you are given to one or two times that, when any of you boys of me a drink I'll take you to mean fight, and I'll not disappoint you, and some one will be killed." And, so saying, he strode out again, leaving a mean looking crowd of men behind him. All who had not been concerned in the business at Nixon's shack expressed approval of his position and hoped he would see it through.

But the impression of Nixon's words upon Slaviv was as nothing compared with that made by Geordie Crawford. It was not what he said so much as the manner of awful solemnity he carried. Geordie was struggling conscientiously to keep his promise to "be 'ard on the boys" and found considerable relief in remembering that he had agreed "to leave them tae the Almighty." But the manner of leaving them was so solemnly awful that I could not wonder that Slaviv's superstitious Irish nature supplied him with supernatural terrors. It was the second day after the funeral that Geordie and I were walking toward Slaviv's. There was a great shout of laughter as we drew near.

Geordie stopped short and, saying "We'll just gang in a meenute," passed through the crowd and up to the bar.

"Michael Slaviv," began Geordie, and the men stared in dead silence, with their glasses in their hands—"Michael Slaviv, I promised the lad I'd bear ye out till we'll, but I just leave ye tae the Almighty, an' I want tae tell ye that I'm keepin' ma wur-d. But," and here he raised his hand, and his voice became preternaturally solemn, "his build is upon yer han's. Do ye no' see it?"

His voice rose sharply, and as he pointed Slaviv instinctively glanced at his hands, and Geordie added:

"Aye, an' the Lord will require it of ye an' yer hoose."

They told me that Slaviv shivered as if taken with ague after Geordie went out, and, though he laughed and swore, he did not stop drinking till he sank in a drunken stupor and had to be carried to bed. His little French Canadian wife could not understand the change that had come over her husband.

"It's like one ben," she confided to Mrs. Mavor, to whom she was showing her baby of a year old. "He's not kees me que tam dis day. He's moe' lawful lad. He's not even look at de baby."

And this seemed sufficient proof that something was seriously wrong, for she went on to say:

"It's tink more for dat lee baby dan for de whole worl'. He's tink more for dat lee baby dan for me." But she shrugged her pretty little shoulders in deprecation of her speech.

"An' invest yer for him," said Mrs. Mavor, "and all will come right."

"An' madame," she replied earnestly, "every day, every day, I pray in sainte Vierge, of tous les saints for him."

"You must pray to your Father in heaven for him."

"Ah, oui! I weel pray," and Mrs. Mavor sent her away bright with smile and with new hope and courage in her heart.

She had very soon need of all her courage, for at the week's end her baby fell dangerously ill. Slaviv's anxiety and fear were not relieved much by the reports the men brought him from that time of Geordie's ominous forebodings, for Geordie had no doubt that the Avenger of blood was hot upon Slaviv's trail, and as the sickness grew he became confirmed in this conviction. While he could not be said to find satisfaction in Slaviv's impending affliction, he could hardly hide his complacency in the promptness of Providence in vindicating his theory of retributive justice.

But Geordie's complacency was somewhat rudely shocked by Mr. Craig's answer to this theory one day.

"You read your Bible to little profit. It seems to me, Geordie, or perhaps you have never read the Master's teaching about the tower of Sileam. Better read that and take that warning to yourself."

Geordie gazed after Mr. Craig as he turned away and muttered:

"The tower of Sileam, he? Aye, I ken fine about the tower of Sileam an' about the tower of Babel as well, an' I've read, too, about the blasphemous Herod an' sick like, Mon, but he's a bet he'd liddle an' lacks disreemaction."

"What about Herod, Geordie?" I asked.

"'About Herod?' with a strong tinge of contempt in his tone. "About Herod? Mow, he's no' read in the Scriptures about Herod an' the wur-rms in the name of him?"

"Oh, yes, I see," I hastened to answer.

"Aye, a fule can see what's flapped in his face," with which bit of proverbial philosophy he suddenly left me. But Geordie therefore contented himself, with ominous head shakings, equally aggravating and impossible to answer.

That same night, however, Geordie showed that with all his theories he had a man's true heart, for he came in late to Mrs. Mavor to say:

"Ye'll be needed over yonder, I'm thinkin'."

"Why? Is the baby worse? Have you been in?"

"Na, na," replied Geordie cautiously; "I'll no' gang where I'm no' wanted, but you pair thing ye can hear outside weepin' an' moanin'."

"She'll maybe need ye tae," he went on dubiously to me. "Ye're a kin' of doctor, I hear, not committing himself to any opinion as to my professional value."

But Slaviv would have none of me, having got the doctor sober enough to prescribe.

The interest of the camp in Slaviv was greatly increased by the illness of his baby, which was to him as the apple of his eye. There were a few who, impressed by Geordie's profound convictions upon the matter, were inclined to favor the retributive theory and connect the baby's illness with the vengeance of the Almighty. Among these few was Slaviv himself, and, goaded by his remorseful terrors, he sought relief in drink. But this brought him only deeper and fiercer gloom, so that between her suffering child and her savagely despairing husband the poor mother was desperate with terror and grief.

"Ah, madame," she sobbed to Mrs. Mavor, "my heart is broke for him. He's heet nothin' for tree days, but his drewn, drewn, drewn."

The next day a man came for me in

haste. The baby was dying, and the doctor was drunk. I found the little one in a convulsion lying across Mrs. Mavor's knees, the mother kneeling beside it, wringing her hands in dumb agony, and Slaviv standing near, silent and suffering. I glanced at the bottle of medicine upon the table and asked Mrs. Mavor the dose and found the baby had been poisoned. My look of horror told Slaviv something was wrong, and, striding to me, he caught my arm and asked:

"What is it? Is the medicine wrong?"

I tried to put him off, but his grip tightened till his fingers seemed to reach the bone.

"The dose is certainly too large. But let me go, I must do something."

He let me go at once, saying, in a voice that made my heart sore for him, "He has killed my baby; he has killed my baby." And then he cursed the doctor with awful curses and with a look of such murderous fury on his face that I was glad the doctor was too drunk to appear.

His wife, hearing his curses and misunderstanding the cause, broke out into walling hard to bear.

"Ah, mon petit ange! It is dat whecky dat's keel mon baby. Ah, mon cher, mon amour! Ah, mon Dieu! Ah, Michael! How often I say that whecky! He's not good ting."

It was more than Slaviv could bear, and with awful curses he passed out. Mrs. Mavor laid the baby in its crib, for the convulsion had passed away, and, putting her arms about the walling little Frenchwoman, comforted and soothed her as a mother might her child.

"And you must help your husband," I heard her say. "He will need you more than ever. Think of him."

"Ah, oui, I weel," was the quick reply, and from that moment there was no more walling.

It seemed no more than a minute till Slaviv came in again, sober, quiet and steady. The passion was all gone from his face, and only the grief remained.

As we stood leaning over the sleeping child the little thing opened its eyes, saw its father and smiled. It was too much for him. The big man dropped on his knees with a dry sob.

"Is there no chance at all, at all?" he whispered, but I could give him no hope. He immediately rose and, pulling himself together, stood perfectly quiet.

A new terror seized upon the mother. "My baby is not—what you call it?" going through the form of baptism. "An' he will not come to the sainte Vierge," she said, crossing herself.

"Do not fear for your little one," said Mrs. Mavor, still with her arms about her. "The good Saviour will take your darling into his own arms."

But the mother would not be comforted by this, and Slaviv, too, was uneasy.

"Where is Father Godlet?" he asked.

"Ah, you were not good to the holy pere de las tan, Michael," she replied sadly. "The saints are not please for you."

"Where is the priest?" he demanded.

"I knoo, not for sure. At de Landin', dat's lak."

"I'll go for him," he said.

But his wife clung to him, beseeching him not to leave her, and indeed he was loath to leave his little one.

I found Craig and told him the difficulty. With his usual promptness he was ready with a solution.

"Nixon has a team. He will go. Then he added: "I wonder if they

would not like me to baptize their little one. Father Godlet and I have exchanged offices before now. I remember how he came to one of my people in my absence, when she was dying, read with her, prayed with her, comforted her and helped her across the river. He is a good soul and has no nonsense about him. Read for me if you think there is need. It will make no difference to the baby, but it will comfort the mother."

Nixon was willing enough to go, but when he came to the door Mrs. Mavor saw the hard look in his face. He had not forgotten his wrong, for day by day he was still fighting the devil within that Slaviv had called to life. But Mrs. Mavor, under cover of getting into his instructions, drew him into the room. While waiting to see his eyes wandered from mine to the other of the group till they rested upon the little white face in the crib. She noticed the change in his face.

"They fear the little one will never see the Saviour if it is not baptized," she said in a low tone.

He was eager to go.

"I'll do my best to get the priest," he said and was gone on his sixty tails race with death.

The long afternoon wore on, but before it was half gone I saw Nixon could not win and that the priest would be too late, so I sent for Mr. Craig. From the moment he entered the room he took command of us all. He was so simple, so manly, so tender, the hearts of the parents instinctively turned to him.

As he was about to proceed with the baptism the mother whispered to Mrs. Mavor, who hesitatingly asked Mr. Craig if he would object to using holy water.

"To me it is the same as any other," he replied gravely.

"An' will he make the good sign?" asked the mother timidly.

And so the child was baptized by the Presbyterian minister with holy water and with the sign of the cross. I don't suppose it was orthodox, and I remember chaotic some of my religious notions, but I thought more of Craig than of anything else. He was more than minister, or perhaps he was so good a minister that day because so much a man. As he read about the Saviour and the children and the disciples who tried to get in between them, and as he told us the story in his own simple and beautiful way and then went on to picture the home of the little children and the same Saviour in the midst of them, I felt my heart grow warm, and I could easily understand the cry of the mother:

"Oh, mon Dieu, prenez mon nassal, take me witz mon nignon!"

The cry awakened Slaviv's heart, and he said huskily, "Annette!"

"Oh, Annette, Annette!" Then to Mr. Craig: "You thuk he's tak me some day? Eh?"

"All who love him," he replied.

"Ah! Michael, too?" she asked, her eyes searching his face. "An' Michael too?"

But Craig only replied, "All who love him."

"Ah, Michael, you must pray in bon Jezu! He's garde notre nassion." And then she bent over the babe, whispering, "Ah, mon cher, mon amour, aillez, adieu, mon ange!" till Slaviv put his arms about her and took her away, for as she was whispering her farewells, passed into the house with many sobs,

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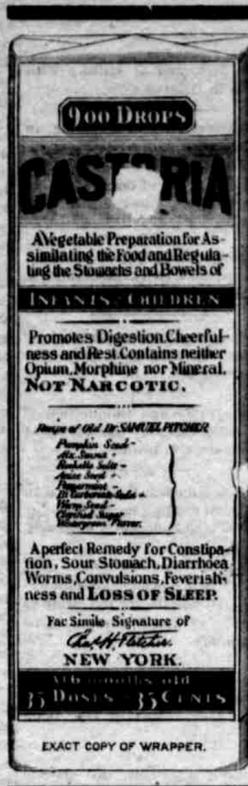
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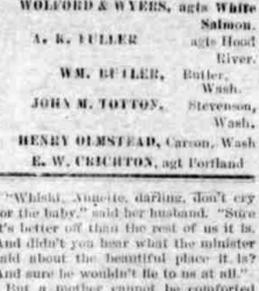
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